

Fourth Installment Of This Year's Best Story

(Continued from Friday.)

CHAPTER VII.

WILKERSON the Plotter, when he had thoroughly learned his lesson Wilkerson coolly, in spite of the letter he had received from Jean Darnell, in New York, telling him of her willingness to finance her scheme, determined he must be friends with John Dorr, at least outwardly. So he smoothed out the visible wrinkles in his face, trying to veil the malicious gleam in his eyes, and spent two days quietly trying to show his amiability, not only to the miners, but to Dorr himself.

Wilkerson was absolutely certain that his old partner, Thomas Gallon, had really made a rich find and that he had lost the location and accepted "The Master Key" as a substitute in the hope that by working it thoroughly he might find the mother lode. In other words, careful manipulation of



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the present mine, palstalking toll in figuring out the trend of the various veins, would lead to that particular pot of gold which had been at the end of Gallon's youthful rainbow of hopes. Wilkerson was determined to be master of "The Master Key." He needed the skilled aid of John Dorr with his engineering knowledge.

John Dorr knew that there was a tremendous secret in Gallon's life represented by the golden key which he had torn from his neck and handed to Ruth when he was dying. That key had figures on it. He understood that those scratches on that golden surface represented something tremendously important, and that the old man had committed Ruth to his charge and had spoken of Wilkerson as his former partner and said, "Wilkerson knows."

What was it that Wilkerson knew? It was better, thought John, to accept his amiable advances and thereby possibly gain his confidence and find out for Ruth's sake that secret which Thomas Gallon had taken to his grave.

So on the second day after the restoration of the old scene of wages and his own reappointment as engineer in charge John went down to the office and said bluntly: "Look here, Wilkerson, maybe both of us have made a mistake. I'm sure my only aim is to help out in the promotion of 'The Master Key.'"

Wilkerson received him amiably. "I'm sure my only interest in this business is to fetch into good ore. All that we are digging out now is dirt without any pay in it."

"I think I know where we can strike first class stuff," Dorr returned. "There is sure pay rock if we travel south from that main tunnel. We may have to go a couple of hundred feet."

Wilkerson looked at him shrewdly. "That will cost money," he remarked. "But I'll take this up with Ruth."

John looked at him with a faint trace of the old cunning in his eyes. He did not like to bear the first name of the mistress of "The Master Key" on those lips.

"If the mine is not paying it's up to us to make it pay," he remarked.

When Wilkerson entered the bungalow Ruth perceived a great change in his attitude. He was no longer sullen, and he was evidently worried. It was a clean worry, and she smiled at him. Had not her father come in with that expression on his face many times? She put her chin in the cup of her hands and asked cheerfully, "What is it, Mr. Wilkerson?"

"May I sit down?" he said awkwardly.

She motioned to a chair, and he pulled out of his pocket a paper covered with figures.

"I think you ought to know how things are going along, Miss Gallon," he said, with unusual formality.

"When your father made me superintendent of this mine I did not realize that the responsibility was so heavy as it is. We are not making any money. We are losing money. You can see by the reports which I have here that our

cleanup lately has been far less than our expenses, and our last one showed practically nothing. We must find the vein again. To do so we must have money. There is no money in 'The Master Key' mine."

"That's what father used to say sometimes," said Ruth quietly. "But he always got it."

"Wilkerson fluffed. 'Miss Gallon, I hope you don't think that I'm not doing my best. I am, John Dorr and I have gone over this matter together. He agrees with me that we have absolutely lost the vein and that if 'The Master Key' is to pay anything more we must find it again.'"

Ruth's expression softened at the mention of John Dorr's name. "What does he think?" she demanded. "What is the chance of finding it again?"

"If we run west, Dorr thinks," said Wilkerson slowly, "we'll recover the vein, but that will cost money, which we haven't got. Do you realize, Miss Gallon, that the pay roll here is over \$1,000 a day? Within a week I have to pay out over \$30,000 for the month, and I tell you frankly that when I have paid that there will be no more money to the account of 'The Master Key' in the bank in Silent Valley."

Ruth realized that he was speaking the truth, even lessening the immediateness of the catastrophe, but her distaste of the man was too great to allow her to discuss the matter with him in the intimate way which she felt was necessary. She must see John Dorr.

She quickly dismissed Wilkerson and then went to Dorr's office herself, meeting him at the door. She bore as a gift a small basket of fruit. Without preliminaries she said, "John, are we broke?"

He laughed; then his face grew grave. "The mine is not paying," he said briefly.

"But can't we make it pay? What is the matter?"

"Money," said John.

"But why money?"

"It will cost \$10,000 to drive that new tunnel," John added as they entered the office.

"But Mr. Wilkerson just said he was going to pay over \$30,000 to the men," Ruth said soberly. "If we have that much money, why can't we?"

A tenderness flooded Dorr's eyes. He comprehended her helplessness, understood why old Thomas Gallon had been so insistent that he, John Dorr, should look after her. She was a mere child. He tried to explain the exact situation, with the result that Ruth finally pushed him off his high stool, got up on it herself and wrote in a large, childish hand right across the face of one of his new drawings, "I must raise \$10,000."

She swung around to John and asked, "How can I get \$10,000?"

Dorr hesitated. His plan was risky in view of Wilkerson's attitude, but, after all, the money must be raised. He said quietly: "Pledge the stock you own in 'The Master Key.' I know a man in New York who will loan you \$10,000 on it." He bent over her earnestly. "But listen, Ruth. If we spend the \$10,000 and we don't find the mother lode, you lose the mine. It's just like a mortgage on a farm."

"But you wouldn't suggest this if it weren't the only way out," she said briefly. "Now, how am I to do this?"

"You must go to New York and see George Everett. I will give you a letter to him, and he will see to it that you get the extra money we need. Meanwhile I'll keep the mine going."

Ruth gave him her full eyes. "You don't like Mr. Wilkerson, do you?"

"I don't trust him," he replied.

At this moment the superintendent entered the office and, seeing their two heads close together over the desk, he scowled.

"I came to see what we are going to do about that new tunnel," he said roughly. "I don't like to start in anything I can't finish."

Ruth swung around to say quietly: "I am going to New York city to see Mr. George Everett, a friend of Mr. Dorr's, and I will come back with the \$10,000."

"Everett, Everett!"—repeated Wilkerson, "who is George Everett?"

Despite John's frowns, Ruth calmly explained. When she had finished

John said to himself, "Bill, that's yours and Wilkerson's business, not mine." If he had listened to the tenor of the message directed to Jean Darnell, in New York, he would have learned what Wilkerson was plotting.

For years Wilkerson had built up for himself a golden image in Jean Darnell. No one realized better than himself that she was a creature of appetite, a lover of silk and velvet. A woman whose eyes widened at sight of a Persian cat. Feminine in every degree, womanly in none. But himself, dominated absolutely, utterly and completely by his desires, had fallen under her spell, and he was going to win her, no matter how. It is a strange thing that when a dishonest man finally yields to an honest passion nothing will satisfy him but the most observance of the ritual of society.

Harry Wilkerson's vision was of walking up the aisle of a great church to meet his bride at the altar.

Yet he had always thought of her in terms of gold; that was a contrast—the pallid, satiny, blue-eyed woman, voluptuous, soft—and his image of her built of yellow gold, dragged out of the bowels of "The Master Key" mine.

This image was now before his eyes: Instead of the warm, sun-blessed California hills, with their faint scent of sage and cactus, he saw a richly furnished room and breathed the odor of attar of roses. Let us not follow him in his dreams. But looking over his shoulder an hour later we read:

"Master Key" Mine, June—
Jean Darnell, Astor House, New York City:

Find George Everett at 111 Broadway and meet Ruth Gallon in Chicago on Santa Fe express leaving here this evening. Introduce Drake as Everett after you have seen Everett and keep the girl to yourself until I can arrange matters.

HARRY.

"I can't send this through any office near here," he thought, "so I guess I'll ride down to Valle Vista and hand it to the conductor. He can send it from Los Angeles."

Three days later Ruth Gallon settled herself in the seat of a Pullman for New York. She was excited. In crossing town from one depot to another through the streets roaring with traffic she had heard sounds that had never met her ears before—the sounds of the world's business which, oddly

enough, seemed to be mostly named over cobblestones. The faint echo of that noise still rang in her ears. It appealed her to think that she must dwell with men who lived in such an atmosphere; also she felt very lonely. She thought of the mine, of Tom Kane in the door of his cook shanty, of the great ore bucket swinging across the gulch toward the mill, of John, bending over his blue prints and papers; of the grave on the hill where her father lay, still within the precincts of "The Master Key."

It had been so impressed upon her that her mission was of vital importance to the mine, that these tender emotions flowed into the same channel with her really keen business instinct. She pulled the key, warm from her bosom, out of its hiding place and looked at it.

"All right, we'll ride," he said. "While you are getting ready I'll write a letter to George Everett."

Ruth laid one slender hand on John's shoulder.

"You're always doing things for me, John," she said simply. "Some day I'll do something for you." She slipped away without a backward glance.

Dorr watched her trip down the hill toward her own little bungalow, and it seemed to him as if he held one end of a golden thread that she was spinning through sunshine. It was anchored in his heart. That thread would be 3,000 miles long before she saw good old Everett. He picked up his pen and wrote rapidly:

"Master Key" Mine, June—
George Everett, 111 Broadway, New York City:

Dear George—When a young, slender, brown-eyed, golden-haired girl walks into your office and says, "I'm Ruth Gallon," and hands you the papers that she will have in her little hand bag, please see that she gets \$10,000. Ever yours,

JOHN DORR.

He would have added more. His finer instinct told him that Ruth should be the first to put the whole scheme before the cool-headed, rather cold-hearted George Everett. He addressed the envelope and sealed it. Then he went to the telephone and called up the station at Silent Valley.

"Bill," he said quietly after listening a moment to see if any one was on the line, "I want to send a telegram. Take it over the wire, please. I'll be down in a little while and pay you."

"Sure," doated back a cheerful voice. "I wish my credit was as good as yours, ten miles away, but it seems as if I have to be always present when I ask for it. Go ahead, John."

"This is it, Bill," said John:

George Everett, 111 Broadway, New York City:

Miss Ruth Gallon leaves tonight to see you about "Master Key" stock. Meet her and wire me on her arrival. Take good care of her or I'll take care of you.

JOHN DORR.

The operator repeated the message and involuntarily adopted a little of John's savage intonation on the last four words. It woke him up to the fact that he was allowing his feelings to become public. He began to see why it was that men looked at him strangely at times, when it was a question of Ruth's interests. He must restrain himself.

The operator did not hang up immediately, but said hesitatingly: "Say, John, there's a wire here; just came in from 'The Master Key' mine. It does not seem to jibe with yours. Wilkerson sent it."

"I'll play fair," said John to himself, and he called back over the wire. "Bill, that's yours and Wilkerson's business, not mine." If he had listened to the tenor of the message directed to Jean Darnell, in New York, he would have learned what Wilkerson was plotting.

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THE MASTER KEY

By JOHN FLEMING WILSON

John told Ruth: "There is no time to lose."

"All right," she said, "I'll be ready in an hour."

John smiled. "All right; I'll take you over in the motor truck or shall we ride to Silent Valley?"

"I've never been to New York," she said timidly, and with that inconsequential logic which maidens have, she added, "Let's ride. I'll take Patsy and you can ride Black Joe."

Dorr did not understand at all that in leaving her home for the great strange city she wished her last hours to be filled with sunshine and a familiar rest of scurrying over dry California on half broken horseflesh.

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